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Gloria Hasnay, *Fleurs du Mal: Éric Baudelaire's "Death Passed My Way and Stuck This Flower in My Mouth"*  
at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, MOUSSE, 22. Dezember, 2021

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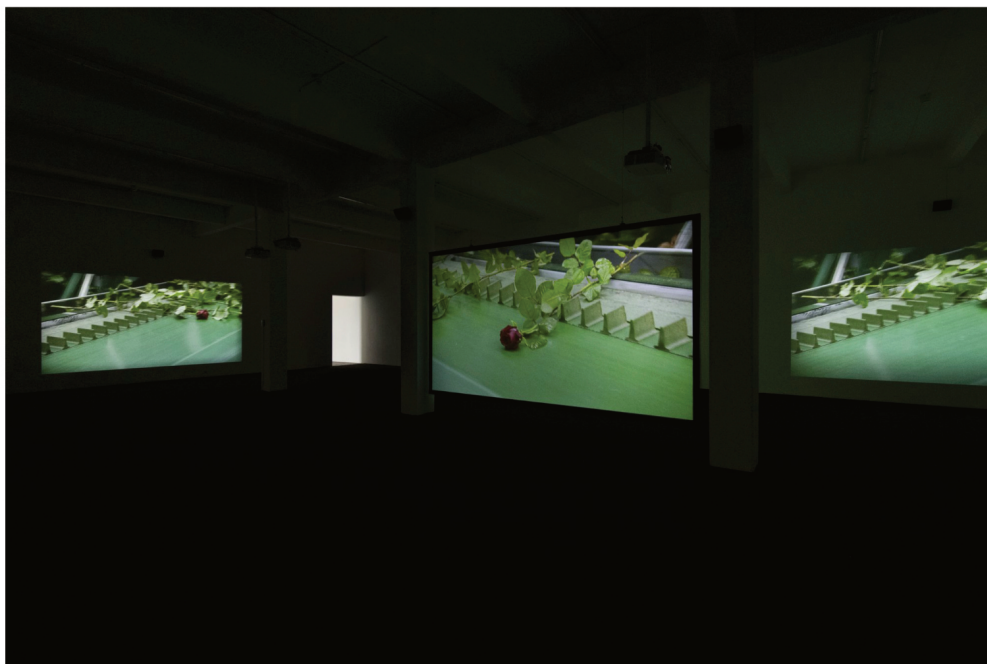
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### *Fleurs du Mal: Éric Baudelaire's "Death Passed My Way and Stuck This Flower in My Mouth"* at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen by Gloria Hasnay

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Flowers may serve as a catalyst, a marker, and sometimes even a pacifier of human relationships; they also function as carriers for the expression of affection or compassion. The history of their trade, however, is closely entwined with that of lopsided economics and exploitation. The ambivalent status of flowers as both common objects and metaphors for globalized trade, propelled by desire and trauma, is at the center of Éric Baudelaire's recent solo exhibition *Death Passed My Way and Stuck This Flower in My Mouth* at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (2021).

Upon entering, we find ourselves amid an immersive five-channel video installation, *This Flower in My Mouth* (2021). The cinematic work was developed over the past three years and is for the most part set in Europe's largest refrigerator—a climate-controlled building in Aalsmeer, the Netherlands, where forty-six million flowers, most of them flown in from Africa and South America, are sold by auction every day. Baudelaire captures the sophisticated yet equally discomfiting industrial methods employed at the Dutch flower exchange: across five large projections unfold scenes of flowers being organized, inspected, sold, and transported by workers wearing flashy safety vests. It is an endlessly hypnotizing, even seductive, loop of highly streamlined working routines.

Initially produced as a feature-length film, the linear flow was divided into multichannel currents by the Paris-based artist in order to create a spatialized version befitting the context of an exhibition. The work is further divided into several chapters, marked by the intermittent disappearances of the projected images, which leave the room and its walls blank, before gradually reemerging. Occasionally, the same shots appear in different projections at slightly overlapping moments, allowing us to follow various associative threads as we ourselves move through the space, pursuing different lines of sight. *Fish Story* (1989–95) by the US-American artist and theorist Allan Sekula comes to mind: this comprehensive body of work investigates the maritime industry as a site of class conflict and an enforcer of strenuous labor conditions. A “fish story” is an extravagant or incredible tale. Correspondingly, Sekula's work constitutes a record of the illimitable scope of the globalized commodity production/distribution. *Fish Story* was realized in seven parts as a book, a photographic essay, and an exhibition, and is regarded as an early critique of global capitalism.

Back to Baudelaire's video installation: the rhythmic sequences depicting the mechanical yet delicate movements of bodies and flowers are accompanied by a specially constructed soundscape of warehouse noise, which fades into Mal Waldron's mesmerizing piano solo “All Alone” (1966)—since stuck in my head—in the last chapter of the work. The gaze of the camera changes: people assemble at a bus stop installed on a bridge; a fictional male protagonist, loosely based on a character in Luigi Pirandello's 1923 short play *L'Uomo dal fiore in bocca* (The Man with a Flower in His Mouth), comes into view. We see him roaming the streets at night, witnessing a woman through a shop window carefully wrapping a gift. By blending methods of documentary and fictional filmmaking, Baudelaire draws further attention to the uncanny relationship between the conditions of everyday life and the (infra)structures of the globalized economy.

Comprising three parts—effectively in accordance with the spatial division of the Kunsthalle—the exhibition continues in the second room with two more new works. *Gypsophila, November 3rd, 2021* (2021) is composed of a table and an arrangement of pharmaceutical glassware, each regularly restocked with flowers—baby’s breath, to be precise, as the Latin name in the title discloses. The work evokes associations to laboratories, and thus introduces another facet to the topic of nature and its objectification. Also in the same room is a work hung on the wall made from paraffin, a waste product generated by the extraction of petroleum, which bears the exhibition’s title burned deep into its waxy surface, sealed in a Plexiglas box. Albeit perhaps a somewhat redundant gesture in terms of placement, the work serves as a (material) link between the first and the last part of the show.

Baudelaire’s preoccupations with the abstractions and poetics of science and the global economy transforming our planet culminate in the third room. The presented works constitute an adequate physical solution to a more or less tangible problem: the material embodiment of data. Baudelaire has translated statistics that he collected during the pandemic into sculptural reliefs, all dated 2021, made from paraffin and framed in acrylic glass containers. Produced on-site at the local Kunstgießerei St. Gallen, the sculptures visualize specific global as well as personal states of crisis and set them into relation: *Death (COVID-19), January 2020–June 2021* shows the dramatic rise of deadly coronavirus cases, especially during the first months of the pandemic, while *Carbon emissions, January 2020–June 2021* directly links the confining consequences of the pandemic to dropping emissions during the same period. Another example of the interrelation of this global disaster and individual experience are the visualizations in *Loneliness (Google searches), January 2020–June 2021*.

The diagrams are burned into the wax by means of a computer-software-driven robotic arm. The sculptures visualize otherwise-invisible data, while they themselves are produced through the organization and transfer of data. Their complex material execution possesses a poetic and beautiful power that manages to carry us beyond the mere (re)presentation of the economic logic that organizes our lives into quantifiable and predictable elements.

An installation of eleven black fabric panels in the same room evokes loose associations with the history of the facility currently housing the Kunsthalle. Constructed in 1903, the building was used as a warehouse for St. Gallen’s booming textile industry in the early twentieth century. Here, the play of Italian dramatist and novelist Pirandello again serves as a point of departure for Baudelaire. Carrying the same title as the short play, *The Man with the Flower in His Mouth* (2021) presents us with its English translation silkscreened onto the eleven cuts of textile. Every panel is hung over a metal bar mounted high on the wall and drapes to the floor, allowing for the entire theater piece to be read at eye level.

The play centers on a man with a flower-shaped tumor on his lip who approaches a traveler in a bar late at night. One man is awaiting his untimely death resulting from the incurable tumor, and evades thoughts of his impending fate through conversations with strangers and a meticulous observation of every detail of existence. The man at the other end of the dialectic is rich with time and absorbed by the mundane affairs of everyday life. The current state of the world with regard to the pandemic only enhances the affect of this particular part of the exhibition.

With the various new works organized together at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen—works made according to different logics or demands, but with very similar concerns—Éric Baudelaire achieves a narrative structure that adroitly explores the symptoms and (sometimes contradictory) manifestations of our relationship to the world and its finiteness. Like *Fish Story*, Baudelaire’s exhibition is a skillful mapping of the circuits of capital, chronicling the contemporary global economy and our collective as well as individual roles therein.

